

24 March 2003

RUSSIA: New parliamentary force for "traditional spiritual values"

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Long-running attempts by Orthodox, Muslim, Jewish and Buddhist leaders to consolidate their positions with state assistance have entered a new phase with the creation of a public-parliamentary commission "In Support of Traditional Spiritual and Moral Values in Russia". Unveiling the project at the Duma (parliament) on 18 March, People's Deputy Valeri Galchenko termed it a cross-party initiative in conjunction with the Interreligious Council, a consultative body founded in January 1999 which embraces representatives of Russia's so-called traditional confessions: Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism. The new commission plans to propose draft laws to parliament and lobby the government in support of "traditional spiritual and moral values".

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According to the event's official press release, the new body aims to "unite the forces and co-ordinate the activity of parliamentary deputies, clergy and society in legislative, other parliamentary and social support for traditional spiritual and moral values". This is to include proposal of related draft laws to parliament and lobbying associated issues within Russia's executive organs of power.

Metropolitan Kirill stated that further legislation was necessary in order to co-ordinate with and harness the potential of traditional religions in the social sphere. While the new commission would pursue this, however, he maintained that religious leaders did not wish "to create a system for lobbying our own narrow, corporate interests".

His colleagues also pointed to what they saw as the need for developments in legislation. Ravil Gainutdin described Russia's 1997 law on religion as "a notable step towards support for traditional religions," while Rabbi Zinovy Kogan claimed that there were 100,000 religious groups according to the same law "but only 100 have made themselves known to the authorities – that part of the law doesn't work". According to the 1997 law, believers gathering only to worship and to teach their own followers constitute a religious group, which is obliged to report its existence to the local authorities only should it wish to obtain the full legal rights of a religious organisation at a later date.

Claiming that, in contrast to geopolitical territory, canonical territory was "indestructible," Kogan nevertheless also maintained that the more transparent Russia's physical borders became, "the stronger another, invisible border should be – the spiritual security of the state". The chairman of the Duma's committee on religious and social organisations, Communist Party deputy Viktor Zorkaltsev, maintained that the new commission would "resolve positively" this issue of spiritual security, and called for a Religion Code similar to those on Land and Tax, "to determine once and for all the rights, duties and positions of the 60 different confessions in our society".

Since Metropolitan Kirill thought that some might question whether the inclusion on the new Commission only of members of the so-called traditional confessions signified "discrimination," he explained that "the desire to nurture co-operation should begin with realistic steps," but could perhaps expand to include others in future. He stressed, however, that the Interreligious Council "includes faiths which were always here, which were never imported into Russia". (This is a moot point: the first Buddhist missionaries from Mongolia, for instance, reached southern Siberia only after it was incorporated into the Russian Empire in the mid-seventeenth century and at least several decades after records of a Roman Catholic and Lutheran presence in the heartlands of European Russia.)

While non-members of the new Commission, Russia's Protestants have also recently made a display of their support for traditional moral values. At their second National Prayer Breakfast held at Moscow's luxury Marriott Hotel on 27 February, representatives of a wide variety of Protestant churches prayed for the Russian parliament, government and the spiritual, social and economic prosperity of Russia. Prior to a prayer for Vladimir Putin, all present were invited to stand "in order to express our respect for our president," which, an Orthodox representative commented to Forum 18 News Service, was "quite unlike anything even in the Soviet period". In attendance were Zorkaltsev and his Duma colleague Aleksandr Chuyev, who congratulated the organisers of the event and praised it as "a good and natural path to the harmonisation of interconfessional relations".

The new Duma Commission "In Support of Traditional Spiritual and Moral Values in Russia" bears a striking resemblance to a "Federal Commission for the Support of Traditional Confessions" written by Chuyev in a never-proposed draft law just over a year ago. That body would have included representatives of unspecified traditional religious confessions and ruled upon applications by other faiths to receive the same status and hence right of access to Russia's state institutions.

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